

THE BALKAN REGION AS A NEW TARGET FOR THE IRANIAN-ISRAELI POLITICAL RIVALRY*

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Abstract

The Balkans have always had dangerous groups as right-wing or left-wing extremists, organized crime, nationalist protestors, or extremist Islamist groups that pose risks for the area's security. These conditions that make the Balkans an attractive target for Hezbollah and Iran, are also a cause for increasing the focus of Israeli security services. Israel appears to be concerned about Hezbollah and Iran manifestations in various areas and also in the Balkans. For a complete understanding of the relations and the rivalry between Iran and Israel in the Balkans, all elements should be taken into account. The article argues that there is a discrepancy between the rhetoric of the Iranian and Israeli leaders and the strategic realities: each call for the destruction of the other constitutes also a threat to his own survival.

Keywords: Israel, Iran, Balkans, Muslims, rivalry.

Özet

Balkanlar'da yaşayan aşırı sağ veya sol, organize suç mensupları, milliyetçi protestocular veya aşırı İslamcı gruplar bölgenin güvenliği için tehlikeli bir durum oluşturmaktadır. Bu durum Balkanlar'ı Hizbullah ve İran için cazip bir hedef haline getirirken İsrail güvenlik servislerinin bölgeye yönelik dikkatini artırmak için de bir sebep teşkil etmektedir. İsrail, Hizbullah ve İran'ın çeşitli alanlarda ve de Balkanlar'daki tezahürlerinden endişe duyduğunu görünüyor çünkü bu durum Tel Aviv'in çıkarlarını tehdit etmektedir. İran ve İsrail liderlerinin söylemleri ve stratejik gerçekler arasında bir tutarsızlık mevcut: her birinin diğerine yaptığı yıkım çağrısı, kendisinin de var olma tehdidini oluşturur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İsrail, İran, Balkanlar, Müslümanlar, rekabet.

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Introduction

The 1990s were marked by the competition of Iran and Israel not only for hegemony in the Middle East, but also for other regions such as Balkans. Ahmadinejad's rhetoric towards Israel can be explained by the arrival in power of a man devoting a form of worship to the founder of the Iranian Islamic regime; Ruhollah Khomeyni, who used an ideology to guide Iran's foreign and domestic policy. This ideology is made up of religious, leftist, anti-imperialist components, all of which can explain the opposition to Israel.¹ Therefore, this opposition of Iran to Israel or US is appeared in an ideological nature and includes also Iran's opposing position to its Arab neighbors. This makes clear also Iran's ideological objective of exporting its Islamic revolution abroad adopting an aggressive rhetoric against the Jewish state.

Therefore, many of the Iranian international activities constitute models that might be applicable also in the Balkan area. Porous borders, rampant corruption, underdeveloped regions, and the relatively weak security of Balkan states allow the expansion of Iran and Hezbollah's operations in the region. Iran's diplomatic expansion is a part of its strategy used to balance the international community's pressure in its nuclear program. Another important part of this strategy includes the developments of Iran's economic and political influence in the states with Muslim majorities that interfere with the Israel's interests. In general, diplomatic, cultural and investment activities made by Iran are under the control of their intelligence services. Balkans in Iran's view, is an important area because security and law enforcement are not at a level that can contradict with Iran's interference. Additionally, in the Balkans there is a Muslim population like that of Bosnia Herzegovina that is sympathetic to foreign-based Muslim influences.

On the other hand, Israel continues to increase its diplomatic, trade and tourism presence in the Balkan region. Therefore, Israeli diplomats, tourists and Jewish populations in different regions -including Balkans- are considered as potential targets of Iranian threats. Many in Israel's

¹ For more informations about Iran's regime and further read: Mehmet Seyfettin Erol, "İran'da Neler Oluyor?", *Muslim Port*, <http://www.muslimport.com/iranda-neler-oluyor-259yy.htm>, (Date of Accession: 20.04.2017).

strategic community, view Iran's virulent anti-Israel rhetoric and calls for the destruction of the state as fundamental parts of the strategic challenge, not just a rhetorical sideshow.

Netanyahu's rhetoric can be explained by the arrival in power of a man who inherited part of his political thought from his father's theories about the Jewish people who were constantly threatened. According to Netanyahu, Tehran is a regime of religious fanatics without any rationality, who would be ready to use the atomic bomb to destroy the Jewish state. Iran's nuclear program and its support for Hamas and Hezbollah are the two elements, combined with Iranian leader's statements justify Netanyahu's preventive intervention against Iran before being late. But the rhetoric of Netanyahu and Ahmadinejad are not enough to shed light on the rivalry between their two states. The relationship between Iran and Israel is dependent on the relationships of these two states with the United States. A Foreign Ministry assessment argues, that "The total delegitimization of Israel's existence, which lies at the heart of Iran's policy, is based on deep ideological foundations and attracts growing popular support not only among Shiites but also among Sunnis. Alongside the United States ('the great Satan'), Israel ('the little Satan') is the primary focus for incitement and subversion. . . ."²

Israel is afraid that U.S. -world's leading power- will choose Iran as its main partner in the region, and this is why the Jewish state tries to undermine Iran's efforts to move closer to the United States. Indeed, Iran and the United States appear as potential allies because they face the same threats of Sunni extremism in different regions of the world.

Thereby, in this work, it will be estimated the impact of Iran to the Muslim populations of Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia. In the continuation of this study, it will be examined the impact of Israel towards the populations in Balkans and its efforts for balancing Iran's activities in this geography. Besides these, it will be also analyzed over the assumptions if the rivalry between Iran and Israel constitute any risk for the future of Balkan region.

² Dalia Dassa Kaye, et al., "Israel And Iran: A Dangerous Rivalry", *National Defense Research Institute*, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1143.pdf, 2011, p. 31.

The Impact of the Iranian Islamic Republic on the Muslim Populations in Balkans

The Impact of Iran Towards Bosnia and Herzegovina: Compared to other Balkan countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a place where Iran has the strongest activities. Bosnian Sunni Muslims tend to use religion, as a means of nationalism in various areas, such as in the southwestern Macedonia, where they adapt interests. A non-Sunni actor like Iran, has a greater success in Bosnia than in Albania and Kosovo where the ethnic nationalism is more pronounced.

The Orthodox entity of Republika Srpska has a pro-Israel stance and this has effected negatively the expectations of the Sarajevo government for the support of the 2012 UN Palestinian resolution because Bosnia and Herzegovina abstentioned. This has raised the previous antisocial feelings of Bosnia-Herzegovina Muslims who also began to express anti-Israeli sentiment with the view that Serbs always support Israel.³

It is difficult to say whether Bosnia and Herzegovina may be in the future a center for the terrorism of Hezbollah and Iran, but there is an indisputable situation of Iran's influence in this country. In Bosnia and Herzegovina besides Iran-Israeli rivalry, is also felt a competition between Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and this brings to Iran's activities a bit more difficulties.

The impact of Iran in Bosnia and Herzegovina seems that began in 1979. The war that emerged in Yugoslavia affected deeply the Muslim community living there. This community has easily adopted the Khomein's ideology. The Muslim Bosniak community has been seeking national identity since the 1960s. This situation was further deepened by the fact that Aliya Izetbegovic was imprisoned for publishing the "Islam Declaration". On the contrary, in that time the Turkish Islamic model was described as a secular model for Bosniak Muslims.

³ Chris Deliso, "Israeli Security Concerns And the Balkans", *balkananalysis.com*, <http://www.balkananalysis.com/blog/2013/03/31/israeli-security-concerns-and-the-balkans/>, (Date of Accession: 27.04.2017).

Since 1982, many collaborators of Izetbegovic secretly went to Iran to study theology. This division established the Democratic Action Party (SDA) and led the Izetbegovic presidency in general elections in 1990 in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In 1992, broke out the war between Bosnia and Herzegovina ethnicities. The Muslim Bosniaks have been supported more steadily from Iran regarding to Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The steadfast support of the Muslim Bosniaks (wich belong to the Sunni sect) by Iran (wich belongs to the Shiite sect), means that Iran is strengthening its influence in this geography. Iran, supporting the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina seems that has reached to a higher level of geopolitical position in the Balkans and Europe. Iran is a leading international actor which has equipped Muslim Bosniaks with weapons in the Bosnia-Herzegovina war. Two thirds of the weapons that have been handed to this section are provided by Iran. Iran, sent to Bosniak Muslims not only weapons, but also combatants from the Revolutionary Guards and special force units called “seve” for military training.

The Dayton Treaty that was signed in 1995, ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This treaty also included some provisions about the Islamic foreign volunteers that participated in the Bosnian war helping the Muslim Bosniaks. The Dayton Treaty provided the returning back of foreign fighters to their home countries.

After 1990, Iran is orientated to use soft power towards Balkan area. Some of the most important instruments of Iran’s soft power are some cultural and research institutes such as, Ibn Sina Research Institute, Mullah Sadra Foundation, Pers-Bosniak College, Cultural Center of the Embassy of Iran in Sarajevo. The main aim of all these institutions is to increase the influence of Shia Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is difficult to give numerical data on how effective these activities are, because the number of Shiite Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not officially known. In 2008, according to the Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly, a civilian population of around 23.400 Shiite Muslims living in Bosnia and Herzegovina constitutes 0.5% of the population. According to the Congregational Forum and Public Life Survey in 2009, there are 15.200 Shiite Muslims living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, compared to one and a half million Sunni Bosniaks.

The Impact of Iran Towards Albania: Iran pays a special attention to the Balkan countries, such as Albania, Croatia and Bulgaria, which are at the same time NATO members. In August 2012, Israel -motivated by its security concerns- has opened an embassy in Albania. The diplomatic alliance between Iran and Albania has provoked further Tehran's interest towards this country. While the former Albanian Prime Minister, Sali Berisha, in his speeches has been trying to present Albania closer to Israel than to Iran. For this, it does not seem a coincidence the various Israeli's investments in Albania since 2012.⁴ In this context, focusing on the investments that Telaviv has made in Albania, Berisha's pro-Israeli attitude seems more pragmatic. However, Albania seems to be threatened from Iranian infiltrations as much as Bosnia-Herzegovina. It is clear that in Albania there are pro-Iranian elements that can support Tehran's financial activities. Since Albania has a weak economy and this phenomenon is nurtured by the regional economic crisis, this country remains open to any other country that tries to make investments in it.

Ipsa facto, Islam was not a strong factor in the nation-building process for Muslim populations in the Balkans. To be explained with other words, in the Albanians' political claims there is no religious element. For Albanians, religious identity was abased and of a second importance. Analogically the Bosnian Muslims gave more importance to the Islamic religion in their national identity but at the same time they carry out a lot of secular elements too. The Bosnian Muslims and Albanians, developed a national consciousness in the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵

The Albanian Bektashi Sufi order has a heterodox structure. The Bektashis in Albania form the only indigenous community in Europe. The Bektashi order has been settled in Turkey for centuries and has become an important element of the Ottoman Empire. In the

4 Vlad Popovici - Chris Deliso, "Albania Oil Industry Enjoys Revival, but Investor-Government Relations Remain a Question", *balkananalysis.com*, <http://www.balkananalysis.com/albania/2012/02/05/albania-oil-industry-enjoys-revival-but-investor-government-relations-remain-a-question/>, (Date of Accession: 28.04.2017).

5 Georges Castellan, *Histoire des Balkans*, Fayard, Paris 1995, p. 358.

Ottoman Empire, the Bektashis had important religious duties towards the janissaries. Until 1826, the Bektashis were one of the 12 Sufis recognized under the Ottoman authority.⁶ But in 1826 the janissaries were suppressed by the Western powers to speed up the removal and modernization of the “archaic” institutions of the Ottoman State. The Bektashi lodges were taken over by members of the Naqshbandi Sufi sect, based in Sharia. This order was hostile to non-Muslim religions.

The Bektashi Sufis lived secretly in Turkey. This situation lasted until 1925 because, with the emergence of a secular Turkish Republic, Sufism was banned in the country. Thus, the Bektashi order moved the center to Albania.

The number of Bektashi population in Albania was estimated to constitute half of the Muslim population living in the country, but in 2011 the population census conducted by the National Statistical Office showed that this ratio was only 2.09. Albanians, who were Muslims of the Ottoman Empire, actually did not do Bektashi worship.⁷ They claim to have inherited the religion traditions from their families.

Albania’s Sunni Muslim Community has two competing groups: the Salafî School, which brings traditional and non-modern Islamic interpretations, and the Hanafî School, which brings liberal Islamic arguments. This created various strains for Albania, which negatively affected mostly the Bektashi community because they exercised the most liberal form of Islam and are positioned against the Salafî supporters group.

The Islamist reformists, the Bektashis who lived in Albania, tried to sum up under a Pan-Albanian Islamic umbrella, but the Bektashi community responded with a strong opposition against this struggle. However, one important point to note is that Islam in Albania is based on national roots and is nourished by patriotic emotions, so it

6 Stephen Schwarz, “Arabs, Iranians, and Turks vs. Balkan Muslims”, *Weekly Standard*, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/arabs-iranians-and-turks-vs.-balkan-muslims/article/644375>, (Date of Accession: 02.04.2017).

7 Gkouma Zoi, *Balkan Muslims And Modern Identities in Bosnia, Albania and Bulgaria*, University of Macedonia, Department of Balkanic, Slavic and Oriental Studies, December 2012, (Master’s Thesis), p. 9.

is estimated that it will take a long time to place the religious rituals imported from outside to this country. Nonetheless, it is clear that the Islamic State of Iran is continuing to exercise soft power positioning several institutions in Albania.

The Impact of Iran Towards Kosovo: One of the most complicated situations in the Balkans remains that of Kosovo and its international status that makes the relations between Kosovo, Israel and Iran complex. Both Israel and Iran do not recognize Kosovo's independence because Israel is worried that Kosovo may be a precedent for Palestine, while Iran qualifies the Kosovo's independence as an American project. In addition, U.S. owns a military base inside the Kosovar territory.

The support that Iran has given to Serbia instead to Kosovo, has to do with the inheritance of Yugoslav leadership of Tito in the non-alignment movement. Tito interrupted diplomatic relations with Israel at the time of the Sixth Six-Day War of 1967. These relations were renewed on January 1992, when Milosevic was in charge. From this period there has been clear support that Iran has given to Bosnian Muslims against Serbs.

Since neither Israel nor Iran recognize the independence of Kosovo, it has been difficult for these two countries to move forward the institutional relations with Prishtina. However, both countries are believed to have effective agents in the areas of business and politics. It shouldn't forget the other international actors that affect with their political and economic maneuvers Kosovo and Serbia. These factors make also the Iranian and Israeli rivalry more complex. One of these international actors is Russia, which commonly changes the direction of support from Iran to Israel or vica versus. On the other hand, both Serbian and Kosovo authorities claim to join the EU. Serbia has managed to balance its interests towards Iran and Israel by inviting Iranian investors and increasing the number of Serbian tourists to Israel every year. This situation makes it more difficult to read the impact of balances of the rival countries in the Balkans.⁸

⁸ Chris Deliso, "Israeli Security Concerns And the Balkans", *balkananalysis.com*, <http://www.balkananalysis.com/blog/2013/03/31/israeli-security-concerns-and-the-balkans/>, (Date of Accession: 20.04.2017).

The first NGOs established in Kosovo have links to Saudi Arabia and Wahabism. From 1999 onwards, Iran has intensified its activities in Kosovo. Particularly charitable organizations have opened many mosques and schools in Kosovo after the end of the Kosovo war in 1999 and have tried to spread a conservative Shi'a Islam. These activities are considered as extensions of Iran's long-term plans, such as Tehran's efforts to export Islam outside the country. For a long time these NGOs' activities have not attracted much attention, but as their efforts to conceal their income sources and spending intentions have begun, perceptions of these NGOs have begun to change. The Kosovo prosecutor's office claims that many of these NGOs are trying to get rid of hundreds of thousands of Euros that have not been reported in the 2005-2015 period.

In July 2016, the Kosovo Government suspended the activities of five non-governmental organizations. In this way, the Ministry of Public Administration stopped the activities of institutions that provide trainings such as "Kur'ani" (established in 2002), "NISA", "Ibn Sina" institute (established in 2012), "Bregu i Diellit" (established in 2007) Prizreni (founded in 2007). The activities of these NGOs are in contradictory with the Kosovo Constitution. In 2015, it was revealed that these NGOs carry out activities related to the Islamic State of Iran. It's verified that these NGOs are trying to spread Shia Islam, anti-American and anti-Semitic propaganda in Kosovo. In addition these NGOs have emerged to be linked to the National University Al Mustafa. The university is governed by the Iranian Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, Ayatollah Aarafi Alirezatar.

At the same time, the Institute for Humanity Education "Ibn Sina", which has been declared as an independent organization, conducts studies on Islamic culture and civilization, especially on Iran language and literature. The founder of the "Ibn Sina" institute is Hasan Azari, who is also the director of the "Qur'an" in Prizren.

The Express Newspaper reported that the Kosovo Customs had seized a packaged propagandist material that was introduced to Kosovo children and contained massacres (so-called "martyr" images). These materials were revealed to be related to the administration of the

Qur'an. The propagandist material was sent by Iran to the director of the "Qu'ran" institute, Hasan Azari Bejandi.

The Impact of Iran Towards Macedonia: A large part of the Albanian minority living in Macedonia (35% of Macedonia's population) belongs to the Sufi Bektashi sect. They say that they belong to the Bektashi Shiite sect. However, the Islamic sects in Macedonia have created a complicated situation. This situation is explained with the Harabati Baba Bektashi Sufi Lodge example. About twenty years, the Harabati Baba Bektashi Sufi tomb was besieged by Arab and Pakistani Islamists. After the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001, some parts of the tomb were closed. In 2003, the use of the lodge become an issue between the Sunni Union and the Bektashi Union. According to the allegations, in 2010 some parts were seized by Sunnis violently.⁹

In 2010, the Harabati tomb were shot and damaged by radical Islamists, but its archive was rescued. The modern way of thinking of the Bektashian people living in Macedonia, has justified the attack on the Harabati tomb. US has recognized the disagreement between the Sunni Islamic community and the Bektashi community in Macedonia and has reflected this situation in several official reports (in the reports on international freedom of religion in 2006 and 2009). But the most critical point of this situation is that Macedonian Slavic authorities are aware of everything. According to these authorities, the Albanian minority reflects a threat to the Slavs in Macedonia. Therefore, the Macedonian government will refuse to return the Harabati monopoly, which was expropriated by the Communist government of Yugoslavia after the Second World War, to the Bektashi Albanian section, provoking the conflicts between the Sunni and Bektashi communities and turning the Albanian minority into a weaker / fragmented ethnic component in Macedonia. Iran is taking advantage of this situation and intends to strengthen its geopolitics in the Balkans by using soft power. Iran has tried to bring the Albanian population of Macedonia under its influence, but it has not been very successful initiative. It has been tried to establish links with the Iranian Investigations Department at Tetova University and Albanian political parties in Macedonia, but it

⁹ Matteo Pugliese, "Iran in the Balkans", <http://www.lowlandssolutions.com/downloads/Iran%20in%20the%20Balkans%20-%20Pugliese.pdf>, (Date of Accession: 19.04.2017).

can not be said to be successful. It seems that the only initiative it has produced is a cultural institutions. Iran has also organized small-scale public rallies.

On May 8, 2013, Saeed Sadegh Mohammadi, has been tasked as the first Iranian ambassador in Macedonia. It seems that in Macedonia -as in other Balkan countries where Iran has diplomatic representatives- the activities undertaken are at an economic, cultural and religious level. Macedonian officials qualify Iran's activities as purely symbolic and as a factor that will positively affect relations between Iran and Macedonia.

It seems that this picture can be hacked into a dangerous game. The very fact of Iran's anti-Semitic interests will keep the Israeli intelligence focused on the overall situation. If in Macedonia will appear any security problem, this will make Israel to show his presence in this country.¹⁰

The Impact of the Israel on the Balkan Countries

Israel is involved in strategic partnerships in the Balkans despite the fact that some Balkan states are aligned with countries like Iran, which Israeli officials clearly oppose. According to Israeli Ambassador Dan Oryan, "Of course, we have a special interest in the Balkans, because it is close to Israel, geographically. And, many of the countries in the Balkans are in the process of entering the European Union (EU). Also, some are already members of NATO, like Albania... Israel is in close alliance with NATO and the EU. Israel wants to strengthen the positive elements. We want more countries in NATO that support Israel. When the EU votes separately, then it is important that they vote for Israel. Every country has a vote in the UN, and it is not only the UN, but also its agencies."¹¹ Ambassador Oryan also explains, "We see radical

10 Chris Deliso, "Israeli Security Concerns And the Balkans", *balkananalysis.com*, <http://www.balkananalysis.com/blog/2013/03/31/israeli-security-concerns-and-the-balkans/>, (Date of Accession: 27.04.2017).

11 Carrie Hart, "Why the Balkan States are Important to Israel", <https://www.mayimmagazine.com/single-post/2015/03/16/WHY-THE-BALKAN-STATES-ARE-IMPORTANT-TO-ISRAEL>, (Date of Accession: 20.04.2017).

Islam's growing influence all over the world, but also in the Balkans. We have a lot of cooperation with governments and organizations tackling this issue, as we see youngsters going from the Balkan countries to Syria to volunteer, and some of them coming back".¹² In this context, Israel's soft power in some of the Balkan countries seems to be more effective regarding to Iran's strategies.

Another issue which is on the agenda has to do with radical Islam. Thus, Israel shares mutual threats with Balkan countries, such as the rise of radical Islam. The Balkans route is a path for arms, drug smuggling, and human trafficking. It has also been traveled by tens of thousands of Middle East migrants hoping for a better life in Europe. Some migrants have been radicalized fighting in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and in other regional conflicts. They are considered security threats as they infiltrate Western societies.¹³ Ambassador Oryan explains, "We see radical Islam's growing influence all over the world, but also in the Balkans. We have a lot of cooperation with governments and organizations tackling this issue, as we see youngsters going from the Balkan countries to Syria to volunteer, and some of them coming back."¹⁴

Israel is involved in strategic partnerships in the Balkans despite the fact that some Balkan states are aligned with countries like Iran, which Israeli officials clearly oppose. Israel values countries that share its political concerns especially those who are members of the EU and NATO. Israeli officials view these two organizations as strategically important for Middle East stability. Israel supports the participation of close allies in the Balkans that have joined the EU, and are joining NATO as member states. Therefore, Israel collaborates with Balkan countries at the highest levels of security and intelligence.¹⁵

12 Hart, Ibid.

13 Carrie Hart, "Understanding the Israeli-Balkans Strategic Partnership", *Amerikan Thinker*, http://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2016/11/understanding_the_israelibalkans_strategic_partnership.html#ixzz4ejzVifH, (Date of Accession: 20.04.2017).

14 Carrie Hart, "Why the Balkan States are Important to Israel", <https://www.mayimmagazine.com/single-post/2015/03/16/WHY-THE-BALKAN-STATES-ARE-IMPORTANT-TO-ISRAEL>, (Date of Accession: 20.04.2017).

15 Hart, Ibid.

Energy needs are vital strategic issue for Russia, the U.S., and Israel in the Balkans. The region is a path for energy pipelines. Israel places great importance on negotiations with its Balkan allies concerning the future global energy map. Since Israel found gas and oil in the Mediterranean, there have been ongoing discussions about partnerships. This may lead to enhanced energy cooperation between Israeli and Balkan leaders.¹⁶

Israel's Impact Towards Albania: The Israeli Embassy that was opened in Albania in August 2012, disturbed Iran and increased its security concerns for the future. Also during this time, Sunni countries and groups have become more active in Albania. It can be said that the presence of both Israel and Sunni states in Albania threatened Tehran's interests in this country. Diplomatic relations between Albania and Israel have renewed Tehran's interest in Tirana. Former Albanian Prime Minister, Sali Berisha's in a speech emphasized that Tirana is closer to Israel than to Iran side. In addition, in November 2011, Berisha described the Iranian leader as a "new Nazi". According to Israeli Ambassador Dan Oryan, "Of course, we have a special interest in the Balkans, because it is close to Israel, geographically. And, many of the countries in the Balkans are in the process of entering the European Union. Also, some are already members of NATO, like Albania."¹⁷ One of the things that should not be forgotten is that in 2011, decision-makers in Albania gave a very important place to Israel by encouraging foreign investment opportunities in the country. Nevertheless, the risk of infiltration of Iran into the Balkans after Bosnia seems to be Albania.

Israel's Impact Towards Macedonia: As for Macedonia, Skopje's relationship with Iran began to gain momentum on February 8, 2013, when the first Iranian Ambassador (Saeed Sadegh Muhammadi) arrived in Macedonia. There are different opinions whether these relations make up any security threat. Israeli analysts believe that the presence of these new diplomatic relations will form a platform for economic, cultural and religious activities. The Macedonian authorities, on the other hand, do not consider the relationships with Iran as a threat. Macedonia maintains strong relationship with Israel, while its relationship with

16 Hart, Ibid.

17 Hart, Ibid.

Iran are established more at a symbolic level. In recent years, Israel has supplied high technology electronic products using them in gathering intelligence activities in Macedonia. In Iran's foreign policy reality, anti-Semitism is on the frontline. Therefore Israeli intelligence services are following Tehran's activities in different regions of the world.

Israel's Impact Towards Kosovo: The most complicated diplomatic situation in the Balkans is the emergence of Kosovo as an independent state in February 2008. Iran perceived the Kosovo independence process as a US-backed project. In addition, the US military base in Kosovo has effected negatively Iran's non-recognition of the new born state. During the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999, Iran's negative attitude towards Pristina could be viewed as a missed opportunity for establishing good relations between them. In Kosovo intervention, Tehran would have left a better image for the Muslim world if it showed activity together with NATO. Israel, on the other hand, does not recognize Kosovo because of the Palestinian problem. Tehran's closeness to Serbia actually dates until the Tito's period. Because in 1967, when the Six Day War broke out, Tito broke the diplomatic relations with Israel. In January 31, 1992, Israel-Serbia relations were reestablished. The whole picture has changed because of Iran's support to Bosniak Muslims against Serbia.

As a result, even Israel and Iran do not agree on any issue they share the same attitude about the inability to recognize Kosovo's independence. However, both countries have "active agents" in Kosovo's business and political circles. This shows that they try to strengthen their influence in the region by showing secret activities in a country that both do not recognize in a legal sense.

Israel's Impact Towards Bulgaria: Recently, another Balkan country that Israel is trying to improve its relations is Bulgaria. The Haaretz Newspaper, published the talks between Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu and Bulgarian Prime Minister of that time (2010), Boyko Borisov. These talks in progress, Turkey have perceived as developments that threat its security. The Israeli-Bulgaria relations are developed due to the efforts of Israel but also due to the Bulgarian

Prime Minister Borisov's approach.¹⁸ Therefore, Borisov after eighteen years has been the first Bulgarian Prime Minister that visited Israel.

A taken photo of Bulgarian ex-Prime Minister, Borisov together with Israeli Intelligence Chief, Meir Dagan's at the Borisov's bureau shows a lot about the relations between two countries. In the Haaretz Newspaper, Barak Refid wrote that the Bulgarian Prime Minister Borisov, personally visited Israel and hold meetings with Netanyahu and Dagan. The meeting of Mossad's president with Bulgarian Prime Minister, Borisov is interpreted as a demonstration of cooperation between the two countries in security and intelligence areas. Israel and Bulgaria share a common concern for the Muslim population. According to Borisov, Muslim population is evaluated as a threat to Bulgaria.

Bulgaria is one of the Balkan countries which attested that terrorist attacks could also occur in this area. Thus, on July 18, 2012 a terrorist attack in Burgas, killed five Israeli tourists and a Bulgarian citizen. A researcher at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Herzliya, Ely Karmon, said that except the terrorist act in Burgas, Hezbollah is responsible for 20 unrelated terrorist plots.¹⁹ The media that influence the formation of the public opinion on terrorism in the Balkans seem that failed to discuss the issue either hypothetically. The media attempt to lower the possibility of terrorist attacks in the Balkans by arguing, for example, that Iran can not have an impact on the Balkan Muslim population because they are Sunni and different from the Muslims that live in the conflict regions.

The Burgas terrorist act, targeting Israeli tourists, became an European issue for the international leaders. The attack in Burgas coincide with the trial of a member of Hezbollah in Cyprus, believed

18 Barak Ravid, "As Turkey Front Freezes, Israel Looks to Warming Balkan Ties", 2010, *Haaretz*, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/as-turkey-front-freezes-israel-looks-to-warming-balkanties-1.326903>, (Date of Accession: 20.04.2017).

19 Chris Deliso, "Israeli Security Concerns And the Balkans", *balkananalysis.com*, <http://www.balkananalysis.com/blog/2013/03/31/israeli-security-concerns-and-the-balkans/>, (Date of Accession: 20.04.2017).

to have planned an attack on Israeli tourists in Cyprus. This Hezbollah member, at the same time a Swedish-Lebanese citizen, had used France and Holland as basis for his activities. This prosecution of a Hezbollah member was the first in an EU country.

After the terrorist attack in Burgas, an unidentified US security official told the New York Times that this was a retaliation against the killings of Iranian scientists dealing with nuclear researches. Doubts about the responsibility of these killings fall on Israel.

The 2012 terrorist attack in Bulgaria attracted international attention and led to the collaboration of Bulgarian intelligence services with that of the international community. Therefore, it can be argued that even though Bulgaria remains a country with a lack of security, Hezbollah will be less likely to repeat a terrorist act in this country than to another one in the Balkan region.

Israel's Impact Towards Greece: Among the Balkan countries, Greece is an important actor that Israel is developing relations. Comparing to the past, the developments in military, economic and politics areas in the relations between Israel and Greece have been quite interesting. Greece has been one of the European countries which has presented negative attitude towards Israel. In fact, it was the only European country that voted negatively for the decision of the United Nations General Assembly in 1947 for the establishing of the Israeli state on Palestinian territory. Besides, Greece maintained its pro-Palestinian and pro-Arab politics on the Soviet Union line, even though it was a NATO member. The negative attitude of Greece towards Israel is connected also with their different religion identities. Orthodox believe that the Prophet Jesus was killed by the Jews and this explicate clearly the Greek states attitude against Israel. Greeks will show this approach at every stage of the Israeli-Palestinian war.

So, what happened and changed the recent Israeli-Greek rapprochement. With the "my enemy's enemy is my friend" approach, Israel started to get closer to Greece. Greece, on the other hand, aims to reach Jewish capital and technology in order to reduce the effects of the economic crisis it has recently fallen into. At the same time, it intends to increase its regional influence, which is declining with the

economic crisis. Until 2010 the cooperation between the two countries in economy, military and tourism fields has begun to strengthen. However, Greece, which will develop its military and entrepreneurial relations with Israel, will lose its credibility in the Arab and Islamic world. At the same time, Greece, faced with severe criticism within the EU which has a critical view on Israel. In these conditions Greece have been criticized also by the Greek public opinion, in terms of having problems in its foreign policy. Briefly, the establishment of good relations between Israel and Greece will lead more to a profitable Israel result.

Conclusions

The Balkans are becoming a growing focus for Western and Eastern international actors. In this context, Balkans are an attractive area for Israeli security services and also an important focal point for Hezbollah and Iran. Iran is trying to be more active in the Balkan region. Even if Iran owns a Shiite majority, it never hesitated to support countries with Sunni majority or countries positioned out of the Middle East region. This might be Tehran's strategy in the sense of intending to be a regional power. It is obvious that Iran didn't hesitate to act at any geography that thinks it would have success. Iran's prestigious and attractive culture earns a certain audience in the Muslim world and in general in the whole world and it constitutes a strong element of Iran's soft power. Tehran has distributed through its religious foundations aid material to the deprived populations, in order to encourage them to support the political movements that are favorable for Iran. Beyond these aspects, there is an anti-Israeli and anti-Western ideological dimension of Iran foreign policy.

On the other hand, Israel is pursuing an active policy to prevent the attempts of Iran and Hezbollah in the Balkans. Thus, Israel has an intensive cooperation with the intelligence services in the Balkans. The embassies of Israel in Balkans geography provide important logistics for intelligence operations. This seems to be the case when Israeli's influence in the Balkans is assessed in terms of Tehran. It can be concluded that some of the Balkan countries have stronger relations with Israel than with Iran. This occurs because, the Western Balkan countries see themselves in Israel's wars. Thereby, Serbs

and Macedonian Slavs identify themselves with the struggle against Muslims, whilst Bosnians and Albanians identify themselves with their post-genocidal struggle for statehood.²⁰ In addition, Israel shares mutual threats with many Balkan countries, such as the rise of radical Islam. In the Balkans, there is growing appreciation for Israel, along with special understanding of Israel's security concerns in a turbulent Middle East, surrounded by certain state and non-state actors that do not want the Jewish nation to exist.

Therefore besides the Israel's rivalry towards Iran, there is also the rivalry of Saudi Arabia that fragmentate the impact of Islam in the Balkan region. In this context, Saudi Arabia and Iran are ontologically opposed to each other because they are countries that use different Islamic interpretations as theo-political tools. The rivalry between these two countries continues strongly in both the Islamic geography and the countries where Muslims are living as minorities. The Iranian centrism, created by the doctrine of the *Valeyet-i Fakih* in the Islamic world, gives Iran a chance to control a transnational network. The main motivation of the Shiites activities and the instrumentalization of Iran's Shi'ism and Muslim World stems from the Shiites living outside Iran and the connections they have with Iran. Because of this influence, Iran has on Shia geopolitics, Shia Islam is more advantageous than Saudi Arabia's Sunni / Wahabbi Islam. Iran has instrumentalized the interpretation of Islam and does not give up using it as a foreign policy instrument. On the other hand, a great number of the population of Irak is also Shia and in this context Iran's foreign policy based on Shiism and the integration of Shiism in region politics, time by time will be in a rivalry with the Irak's one.²¹ The main aim of these countries, is to make their denominational interpretation dominant in the Islamic world. The Iranian soft power had thus reached its zenith in 2006 at the time of the Israel-Hezbollah War, because Iran had a popular position in the Sunni Arab public opinion.²² In this respect, Balkan area is a competition field of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

20 Ben Judah, "Israel's Balkan Offensive", *European Council of Foreign Relations*, http://www.ecfr.eu/blog/entry/israels_balkan_offensive, (Date of Accession: 03.10.2017).

21 Mehmet Seyfettin Erol, "11 Eylül Sonrası Türk Dış Politikasında Vizyon Arayışları ve 'Dört Tarz-ı Siyaset'", *Gazi Akademik Bakış*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2007, p. 39.

22 Thierry Kellner, "Ou Va L'Iran", *Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques*, <http://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Asia-Focus-2-Kellner-Thierry.pdf>, (Date of Accession: 19.04.2017).

In this paper's retrospective, it can be concluded that at least in the medium term, the Iranian or Israeli impact on the Balkan communities wouldn't be very strong. Although, it's confirmed that the Balkans are a potential front for terrorism in any future conflict. This risk multiply the stand aloof of Balkan countries from Tehran.

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